FIVE THINGS **NOT** TO DO IN AN ESSAY

1. Fail to address the question's topic in your introduction

The test of a good introduction is whether someone can guess what the essay question is just from reading it. If not, the introduction has failed. Therefore, a good introduction briefly sets out what the topic is and what your position is regarding the question. Be **specific** about your topic, but don't go into too much detail—no examples or definitions are needed in an introduction.

So, if your question asks you to discuss the thematic links between three myths, it is best to say what the three myths are and to specify what themes you have identified. Don't try to 'wow' the reader with grandiose statements or pithy quotes that broadly relate to your topic. The trouble with such trite openings is that they do not focus your reader. Rhetorical questions are also a bad choice for a first sentence. You are writing an essay, not a blog entry.

The first one or two sentences of an introduction should directly address the question with a statement outlining your position regarding the topic. Using the terminology of the question helps to keep the statement focussed and ensures that you have not misinterpreted or misrepresented it. But never quote the question itself—the marker knows what it is. The next sentence, or sentences, should explain what the key aspects are that inform your position (i.e. they explain why you are arguing that position). The last part of the introduction should outline the method of your argument or the structure of your essay. With that done, you move on to your argument.

2. Stray from the focus of the question (especially in the conclusion)

Students often think a conclusion is where they get to discuss the wider ramifications of their position on the topic, or where they can branch out and touch upon other aspects slightly related to the topic. Wrong. The job of a conclusion is to highlight the key ideas that you have been arguing in response to the question (i.e. readdress the essay question in light of the discussion you have just provided). It helps to reuse the same terminology for consistency (but don't just repeat what you said in the introduction verbatim). You can then summarise each main point from the body of the essay in the logical order in which you presented them. How do you know if something is off topic? Ask yourself whether your paragraph or sentence directly helps you to answer the essay question. If not, it is off topic and should be cut from the essay.

In a conclusion, don't just say that you have discussed what the question has asked you to discuss. You must be **specific** and say what the key aspects were (and why). The trick is to say what you have argued in a concise way that does not just repeat what you have already said (don't repeat your examples). Like introductions, conclusions should be one paragraph.

And never include information—even if *on* topic—that you have not already discussed in the body of the essay. (So that means no footnotes in a conclusion!) The time for discussing the material of the topic is over; your argument is drawing to a close, not breaking new ground. Here it is common for students to get swept away by their own argument and attempt to say something profound. That is fine, so long as it is on topic. Never deviate from the question to discuss something else in the conclusion. If you have been discussing the themes of ancient Greek myths for the whole essay, do not start talking about how parallels can be seen in modern cinema, or how modern society has its own myths. The irrelevant digression belongs to old Abe Simpson, not your essay.

3. Insert quotes without introducing them or relating them back to the topic

Try to use quotations from secondary sources sparingly, if at all. And only include them if they say something of vital importance that you could not have worded better yourself. If you quote someone who says something that anyone could have said because it isn't specific, or does not regard a contentious issue, you are only distracting your marker with unnecessary waffle. If you wish to refute what a source has said, it is a courtesy to quote it so that the reader can see you are not misrepresenting the source. But long quotes or lots of little ones will only hide your own voice—and it is you, not your sources, that is getting the marks for the essay. And don't use a quote that repeats what you just said. That is tedious.

If you do use a quote, you **must** introduce it correctly so that the reader understands why it is there and who said it. Don't just shove it in and hope the reader knows why you have included it. So say something like:

> Regarding survival rates for gladiators, Johnstone states: "Gladiator shows were hardly the bloodbaths we see in modern films and TV programs. If there were five fights in a day, on average only one would end in death." This shows that the risk of death may have been low enough to entice free men to become gladiators.

You must also explain how the quote helps to answer the essay question (here the question would be: 'Why would free men become gladiators in ancient Rome?'). Be explicit: don't leave it up to your reader to work it out. And **never** refer to your quote as a quote ("This ~~quote~~ shows…").

4. Fail to provide references

Essays are designed to test your ability to reference your sources. It is not pointless—it is worth marks. You include references to primary sources when you quote from or refer to a specific episode or instance from an ancient text. For example, if you say that "Hector calls his brother Paris the bane of Troy before the duel with Menelaus", it is necessary to show the author, the work, the book, and line/section number where you read it. That way your readers can check it for themselves. If, however, you say something that is not specific to a passage or is widely understood, you do not need to provide a reference. For example, if you say that "Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works & Days* reveal a misogynistic attitude that is the product of a patriarchal society", you don't need to cite specific passages (though, if you go on to provide examples, you would).

You include references to secondary sources when you use ideas from them. If you say that "the chances of survival for a gladiator in the first century BC were one in ten", you will need to cite whoever gave you that statistic. You also need to include a reference to you secondary source whenever you say something like "Futrell states" or "Hopkins argues" or "Slater believes"—otherwise your readers cannot verify your claims. If you don't include a reference, your argument is weakened. If you keep failing to reference, you risk receiving a zero for plagiarism.

When referencing, use *italics* for book, journal and film titles. So, you would refer to Homer's *Iliad* using italics (e.g. Homer, *Iliad* 3.50).

Use in-text references for primary sources:

> In one of his letters, Seneca states that abusive masters would beat their slaves for something as simple as coughing (Seneca, *Letters* 47).

Use footnotes for secondary sources:

> Nevertheless, Pittman argues that the Romans were totally awesome.[1]

Note that the footnote is always placed after punctuation marks: .”[1] ;[2] ,[3] .[4] :[5])[6]).[7]

5. Use informal language, colloquialisms, or overuse rhetorical questions

An essay uses a different style of language from that of a casual conversation. For an essay, you are being tested on your use of formal communication. There are certain things that are common in speech that should be avoided in an essay.

Rhetorical questions

Responding to an essay question with more questions is annoying. So, try to avoid posing direct rhetorical questions to the reader in an essay. These are usually tiresome to read because they shift the burden of answering the question to the reader when the reader just wants to sit back and let you do that. Rhetorical questions are useful for the person writing the essay (i.e. they help you come to grips with the topic), but it is best to rephrase them as statements or as indirect questions.

> **Question**: Why did Zeus chose to punish man for Prometheus' sins?
> **Statement**: Zeus chose to punish man for Prometheus' sins because…
> **Direct**: Why did slaves not run away from their masters more often?
> **Indirect**: The question arises as to why slaves did not run away from their masters more often.

You can then go on to answer the indirect question without the reader feeling like you have tried to pull them into your discussion. So, one maxim of essay writing is: *don't ask: tell.*

1st Person Singular

Some say not to use the word *I* in an essay. Others say it is fine. If you do use it, it is best to use *I* only in an introduction (and to a lesser extent, the conclusion), rather than in the body of the essay. But use it sparingly; otherwise you can come across as too self-important.

1st Person Plural

Avoid using *we* or *us* in an essay. Saying 'Let *us* now turn to the issue of manumission' sounds pretentious. If you must guide the reader through your argument, use: 'Turning (now) to the issue of manumission'. It still sounds phoney. 'With this evidence, *we* are shown the unsavoury side of Roman society'. This sentence is not so bad, but again it tries to include the reader in the essay. This is fine for books, but for an essay it is artificial and a breach of expected roles. The reader (your marker) should remain a separate and impersonal individual. You wouldn't try to hold hands with someone interviewing you for a job, would you? Thus, the sentence with *we* can be rephrased to maintain distance from the reader: 'This evidence illustrates the unsavoury side of Roman society.'

2nd Person

Don't use *you* in an essay. In spoken English, this is used for generalisation: '*You* would expect that…' or '*You* don't win by giving up'. The word *you*, however, tends to pull the reader into your argument and distracts from what you are saying. '*You* must not disrespect the gods.' *Me specifically? Who told you I disrespected them? Oh, wait. I see now. Carry on.* This sort of

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[1] Pittman (1998) 203. [Note the lack of *pg.* or *p* or *pp* for the page number]

confusion can be avoided by using the indefinite *one*: '*One* must not disrespect the gods'. It may sound strange, but that's just because it's more formal, which is what an essay should be.

Elision

Elision is what happens to words when we speak them (casually). In written form, it is marked with an apostrophe, representing a missing letter or letters. But because spoken English is not formal enough for an essay, don't write *don't*. Instead, write *do not*. This goes for many other elided forms: e.g. *would have* for *would've*, *it is* for *it's*, *she would* for *she'd*.

Colloquialisms

Colloquialisms are phrases and words which are commonly used in conversation but have a non-literal meaning (e.g 'bucketing down'). Use of colloquialisms implies a level of familiarity with the reader that is unsuitable for an essay. Moreover, they weaken an argument by obscuring meaning; e.g. 'He was wasted'. By a wasting disease? Or does this mean 'inebriated'?

Avoiding the above list of common pitfalls for your essays should ensure you receive better marks.